Department of LABOR AND INDUSTRIES

ERGONOMICS
Worker Protection

Ergonomics demonstration project: Alaska Airlines

Need

Air transportation is one of the first 12 industries scheduled to comply with the ergonomics rule (first compliance date July 1, 2002). The industry has a high rate of compensable lost time claims: 380 per 10,000 FTEs for combined State Fund and Self-Insured employers. The industry also has a high count of Work-Related Musculoskeletal Disorders (WMSDs), primarily due to lifting and handling baggage and cargo.

Passenger airline employees typically work under very similar conditions, since they use essentially the same equipment and are subject to the same regulations. Therefore, exposure to risk factors is likely to be fairly consistent across different airlines. Other airlines in Washington State will be able to use the results of this project as an example of methods they can use to comply with the ergonomics rule.

Goals

The goals of this project are to demonstrate that an employer in the air transportation industry, working with employee participation, can:

- Identify a job with risk factors for musculoskeletal disorders.
- Determine whether these risk factors reached levels where they would be covered by the ergonomics rule and/or would reach a hazard level where controls are required.
- Evaluate existing solutions to see if they reduce hazards below the rule criteria.
- Identify other potential solutions to reduce hazards.

Project design

In initial meetings, airline safety and union representatives met with Department of Labor and Industries ergonomists and selected customer service agents (CSAs) as the focus for the project. The airline chose the CSA position as the focus for the project for three reasons: The company believes the job will be covered by the rule; there is employee interest in having this job addressed, and the job can be easily observed by outside personnel without the security issues that would accompany working with ramp agents or other baggage handlers.

Safety and union personnel identified lifting heavy baggage both as a potential cause of injury and as a risk factor covered by the ergonomics rule. Workers reported regularly handling baggage weights that would reach hazard levels under the rule. The participants also had existing controls (roller conveyors) at some of the CSA positions that they considered a possible best practice for reducing hazards.

Working with safety personnel and workers, L&I ergonomists videotaped CSAs, recorded sample baggage weights, and analyzed the job and existing controls to confirm the airline's opinions. All parties met again to confirm the analysis and identify other possible best and acceptable practices, as well as any other controls to address risk factors outside of the rule. A project report was written with airline safety and union input, and this report will be made available through the L&I web site, and directly to other airlines operating in Washington state.

Timetable

November 2000 .....Initial meeting with airline safety and union representatives
December 2000 .....Observation of CSA position
February 2001 .....Analysis and initial report
April 2001.....Follow-up meeting to discuss analysis and controls
July 2001 .....Final report

Results

This project has resulted in a report describing caution and hazard zone risk factors at CSA positions, and best and acceptable practices that can be used to reduce hazards in order to comply with the ergonomics rule. The report will also describe the process used to analyze jobs and involve employees in meeting the rule's requirements. The report will be posted on a special section of the web site as part of a searchable database of best practices. It also will be distributed directly to others in the air transportation industry.

The methods used to analyze caution zone jobs and involve employees, along with the best and acceptable practices in the report, can be used directly by employers in the airline industry to reduce injuries to CSAs. The report findings will also serve as examples to other employers of methods that can be used to control lifting hazards in general.